

REMINISCING ON A WORLD CRUISE



INDIA

Built on a small island and connected to the mainland by an artificial causeway, Mumbai (formerly Bombay) is India's most cosmopolitan city and the pandemonium of its sights and sounds dazzles the senses. Home to twelve million people and with an enormous amount of homeless and jobless families arriving daily, there is a severe problem of overcrowding which results in slum areas growing up on the city outskirts. The approach to the city by sea is a delight. The impressive harbour, seven miles wide at the base and tapering as it goes north, is studded with mountainous islands; to one side the imposing buildings of the city and to the other the palm-fringed mainland slowly rising to the peaks of the western Ghats.



Suffocating in indescribable heat and humidity we arrived here early on a Sunday morning, which was apparently beneficial as the volume of traffic would be greatly reduced. Not having learned anything from our Cochin experience we once again ventured ashore alone in the morning only to encounter a very similar reception committee, hoards of yelling and pushing taxi drivers and those trying to sell goods in a very forceful way. Somehow we managed to safely board one of the million waiting taxis and asked to be taken to The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, which is not a straightforward transaction in itself, and negotiated a fare. The streets being fairly empty, the driver hurtled along precariously in a frightening manner. With his right arm leaning on and encircling the steering wheel in a most peculiar fashion, he seemed to spend the entire journey turned round to face us seated in the back. Not sure what his left arm was doing but it never got near the wheel! After whizzing around the streets for what seemed like ages he pulled up alongside a shop belonging to a relative of his and insisted we go in. We refused and had to spend the next five minutes in dispute with him. It was all such hard work! He was so argumentative and insistent. Eventually he gave up and drove us to our required destination and then demanded an increase in the agreed fare! The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel is not only grand and cool, but an oasis of serenity, in stark contrast to the world outside. It houses a number of shops where we were able to make purchases in an orderly fashion without having to shout and argue and be jostled to death.

Opposite the hotel is the Gateway of India, a huge monument built to mark the occasion of the visit of King George V and Queen Mary, the first ever visit to India of a reigning monarch. This adjoins Marine Drive, a three mile long fashionable promenade. We had intended to visit the monument and take a leisurely stroll along the prom. Once again this simple intention became an impossible task due to the constant pestering of street-sellers who insisted on following and manhandling us. This never ending accosting is really wearying and eventually we had to give up and return to the ship. Different taxi driver this time!



Having cooled off and lunched on the ship, the afternoon was spent on an organized trip around 'unexplored Mumbai' by minibus and on foot and was described as a 'lifestyle tour'. A small group of us boarded the Boiling Bus from Hell and almost roasted alive. Once again it was hot, filthy and utterly airless due to windows being sealed, apparently to prevent beggar's hands from entering. There was no air conditioning. Instead tiny electric fans were fixed above the seats but none worked. At our first destination, we gratefully

dismounted into the dust and heat of the Girgaum. Cocooned amidst the hustle and bustle is a residential area called Kotachiwadi. A coastal community of Christians, originally from Maharashtra and Goa live here and have managed to preserve their traditional homes and their culture. In the narrow streets, we saw their picturesque houses, built in typical Portuguese style with carved balconies and small gardens, albeit now very shabby and neglected. We were invited into one of the larger houses, which was beautifully furnished, to take refreshments with a most interesting family.



Back out into the narrow streets and continuing our walk around this fascinating district, we came across a shrine, almost like a small church, which one could enter to pray.



Continuing on foot we then explored the Hindu district of this ancient complex where we visited a small Hindu Temple overlooking Banganga, a sacred water tank surrounded by 400 year old temples, most of which have now been invaded by dwellers. This tank resembles a massive stone rectangular swimming pool, with many steps rising up from each side. A few people were bathing while a group of children played cricket at one end. Ignoring the advice of our guide, a woman from our group gave them sweets and almost caused a riot! Our tour guide was not pleased.

Our walk continued through the narrow streets of this ancient area where we saw local barbers, cobblers, blacksmiths and seamstresses, to name but a few, going about their daily lives

and carrying out their business in tiny workshops along the street.

We then visited an outside laundry, the sight of which is hard to imagine. Under the relentless sun, the workers stood over vast troughs, pummeling the clothes with a wooden pole. Then covering a vast area, there was row upon row of washing on



tightly packed lines, held aloft by wooden poles all leaning at different angles. Groups of workers could be seen lying under them for shade and rest.

So fascinating!

There are times however, when one can't help but feel like a voyeur invading peoples lives.



An interesting fact is the way rich and poor live literally side by side, with smart apartment blocks towering over slum dwellings. Even though the majority of inhabitants of the area we visited are extremely poor and the streets and dwellings squalid and filthy, it was an experience not to be missed, being so rich in sights and sounds and cultural differences.

And so it was back on the Boiling Bus for our final rattle through the teeming streets, eventually gratefully tumbling off like limp and lifeless rag dolls and up the gangplank to the comparative sanity [sic] and air-conditioning of the ship; once again filthy, overheated and exhausted.



For the next five days we cruised the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea en route to Egypt and the Suez Canal. As dawn broke over the Gulf of Aden on a March morning, Yemen lay to our right and Somalia to our left. We entered the Strait of Bab el Mandeb, known as the Gate of Tears, at around 8 am and were thrilled to be able to see firstly the mainland of Eritrea and later Djibouti where the landscape was desolate and mountainous. The day was extremely hot and sunny, the sea resembled



a sheet of glass and we stood mesmerized, binoculars in hand, to witness wonderful sights. Gliding silently past uninhabited islands, one topped with an old fortress or monastery, we spotted a school of dolphins, Portuguese Men of War jelly fish and a variety of fishing vessels. Stepping from the air conditioned cabin onto the balcony was akin to entering a furnace, the intense heat creating a remarkable and unusual atmosphere, particularly when the heat mists rolled in and enveloped the ship. At one point an Albatross repeatedly flew past our 10th deck balcony in order to dive the sea for fish. It was a remarkable sight, the bird being almost close enough to touch. It kept encircling, then diving, then rising up again to re-encircle. At each attempt a fish was caught. This was a very exciting and thoroughly enjoyable day for us.

Maria Dillon